

Amalek in the Hague

Category: Beshalach, Shemos

Who was Amalek? In the Hague Tribunal everyone is talking about it. Even more importantly, there seems to be a spiritual Amalek blocking our defense of Israel. How can we uproot it?

Amalek, Amalek...

South Africa brought a lawsuit against Israel at the International Court of Justice in The Hague, accusing it of genocide.

One key piece of evidence presented was Prime Minister Netanyahu's statement after October 7th regarding Hamas. He quoted the Torah's verse about Amalek: "Remember what Amalek did to you' — we remember, and we will fight against Amalek." Additionally, in a letter to soldiers, the Prime Minister reiterated the call to "remember Amalek." They showed a video of soldiers dancing to words about "wiping out Amalek," and statements from a member of the Knesset saying likewise that we need to eradicate Amalek.

Who is this Amalek that the lawyers at the Hague Tribunal were so obsessed with?

In our Torah portion, Beshalach, we read that "Amalek came and fought with Israel in Rephidim." The Jewish people had just left Egypt; G-d had split the sea for them and performed miracles that shook the entire world—He provided them with 'manna' from heaven and brought forth water from a rock. Things were going pretty well for the Jewish people and everybody was afraid of them. And just when everything seems to be settling down, they hear that Amalek is coming to attack.

Amalek, the man, was the grandson of Esau, the brother of our forefather Jacob. Jacob passed away close to two hundred years before the Exodus, and so did Esau, his brother. However, during his lifetime, Esau managed to pass on to his grandson Amalek the hatred he harbored for Jacob and his descendants. Amalek did not forget what his grandfather Esau taught him; on the contrary, in him, the hatred only intensified.

Amalek had many descendants, and in a short period, he established a huge tribe of Amalekites, passing on the hatred from generation to generation. As long as the Jewish people were slaves in Egypt, Amalek wasn't exactly a factor in their lives. But the moment they left Egypt and became free, Amalek, who lived in the area of modern-day Eilat, came all the way to the Sinai Desert to attack.

Now, the Jews were not planning on approaching the Amalekites, and they had no conflict over land or anything else. Amalek traveled a long distance just to attack the Jews. It was an attack born out of pure evil, without any other motives—just to cause harm for the sake of causing harm. Amalek knew that the nation would pay a high price for the attack; even Egypt, a global power, paid a very high price for causing trouble to the Jews. Still, Amalek felt compelled to come.

The War With Amalek

The Torah says that Amalek “happened upon the Jewish people,” “*asher karcha ba'derech*,” and the Midrash explains that the Amalekites would hide in ambush and attack the Jews suddenly.

What can I say, this is beginning to sound familiar.

Rabbi Eliezer Hamoda'i adds more details: “They would sneak into ‘Clouds of Glory’ [where the Jewish people were living], kidnap Jewish people and then kill them.” They would literally take hostages; that's what the Torah tells us about Amalek.

Well, Moses told Joshua to select a fighting force to combat the attackers, and he, Moses, would go up to the top of the hill, Mount Sinai, and pray there for the victory of the Jewish people.

The Torah recounts in our Parsha that “Joshua weakened Amalek and his people at the edge of the sword.” Clearly, he didn't score an absolute victory. Then, G-d commanded Moses, “Write this as a testament and place it in the ears of Joshua: I will surely wipe out the memory of Amalek” (Exodus 17:14). In the book of Deuteronomy, the Torah records this as a mitzvah for us: “Remember what Amalek did to you” (Deuteronomy 25:17). This final quote is what the Prime Minister cited in his speech.

The Spiritual Cause for Amalek

The next time we encounter Amalek is in the Book of Samuel, where G-d commands King Saul to go and conquer Amalek, leaving no one alive. In practice, Saul did not fulfill G-d's command in its entirety; he showed mercy to King Agag and spared him (1 Samuel 15). Many generations have passed since then, and the Amalekite people have assimilated with other nations, rendering this command impossible.

So, what is the underlying meaning of the commandment to remember Amalek? What are we supposed to remember?

The answer can be found in our Torah portion, just one verse before the story about Amalek: "And [Moses] called the name of the place 'Massah' and 'Merivah,' because of the quarrel [*merivah*] of the Israelites and because they tested G-d [*massah*], saying, 'Is G-d among us or not?'" (Exodus 17:7).

Rashi explains that this verse serves as an introduction and explanation for the war with Amalek. It happened because there were Jews who had doubts about whether G-d was with them!

It's very strange. G-d took them out of Egypt, split the sea for them, provided them with manna from heaven, and gave them water from the rock. Are you really not sure whether G-d is with you?

Rashi brings a parable from the rabbis of the Midrash: "A man carries his son on his shoulders and sets out on a journey. The son sees an object and asks his father to pick it up for him. The father gives it to him, and the same happens twice more. Eventually, they meet a man on the way, and the son suddenly says, 'Tell me, did you see my father?' The father replies, 'You don't know where I am??' He throws the child down—and a dog comes and bites him" (Exodus 17:8).

The fact that the Jewish people had doubts about G-d's presence caused them to lose the special protection they had. As a result, Amalek attacked them.

The Chassidic Amalek

In Chassidic thought, Amalek has the numerical value of the word *safek*, doubt.

The spiritual Amalek, that we are commanded to always beware of, is “doubt.”

Many times people tell me they were taught in Hebrew school that Judaism is not about blind faith; in other religions, you have to accept everything and if you ask questions, you get thrown out. But in Judaism, questioning is encouraged.

Well, this is true—only to a certain point.

In English, a “Question” means to ask, but “Questioning” means to challenge.

Asking questions to understand the meaning of a text or teaching is positive and necessary for Torah learning. However, to challenge—in other words, to express doubts about whether the Torah is true: that is not encouraged. If a person has doubts in his faith, answers may not always satisfy him—because doubt comes from a different place.

Are You Convinced About Israel

When we think about the war in Israel, one of our primary challenges is the spiritual Amalek.

Many young people in Israel and abroad lack the internal conviction that the Land of Israel belongs to the Jewish people. Deep inside, they are unsure about the just cause of the State of Israel. Perhaps the land belongs to the Palestinians; after all, they were there before 1948. The UN approved giving Jews a part of the land in 1948, but that doesn't necessarily make it right. Lord Balfour's declaration in 1917 supporting the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people doesn't grant us the right to expel the Arabs.

These young people feel like occupiers; they feel like Jews are colonialists, and they lack the internal conviction to fight for the land. When people say that Jewish students in American universities struggle to defend Israel, it's not merely a lack of information; it goes deeper. They aren't convinced of the righteousness of the cause; deep down, they fear that maybe the Palestinians are right.

The Rebbe always used to refer to the State of Israel as “Eretz Yisrael” (the Land of Israel). In a letter from 1969, the Rebbe explained to President Shazar why he uses this term:

“Something established in 1948 by the will or approval of the nations of the world holds no validity and substance to answer the claims of the Arabs, the Vatican, the UN, etc., and the Canaanites (both open and hidden) that we stole the land.”

If the state is a new entity born in 1948, we don't have a valid answer to the Arabs' claim that we expelled them from their homeland.

“I don't delude myself,” the Rebbe continues, “that arguments of justice and righteousness will convince the UN and the Vatican etc., but it is absolutely critical for the morale of the soldiers and the university students in American colleges!” (Igros Kodesh 26:167)

In a letter to the late MK Geula Cohen, the Rebbe elaborated further:

“Eretz Yisrael was given to the Jewish people from the Almighty in a covenant with our forefather Abraham. In exchange for the name ‘Canaan,’ the name ‘Eretz Yisrael’ was firmly established for thousands of years—both in the Torah and among people, from young to old. Matters like these are not subject to votes and majority decisions—which can change from time to time. *Changing this name weakens the claim of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel.* A new name indicates that the entire matter began in 1948, and, by implication, also the claim and ownership of Eretz Yisrael starts then!” (Igros Kodesh 26:143)

The sole foundation for our right to the Land of Israel lies in its connection to the Torah. This unique claim is rooted in the divine promise made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, assuring the land for their descendants. For those who lack this belief and connection to the Torah, defending the idea that the land belongs to us genuinely becomes a formidable challenge.

So, the way to challenge the spiritual Amalek in our generation is through a positive connections to Judaism. When we draw a Jew closer to his heritage and closer to the Torah, he will develop a sense of connection—that the Torah is his, and that the Land of Israel is his, and all of ours: our eternal homeland.